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WASHINGTON POST
29 May 1987

Top Officer Defects From Cuba

General Flies Family To Naval Air Base In Florida Keys

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The deputy chief of staff of Cuba's armed forces defected to the United States yesterday, flying a small plane with his wife and three children aboard to the U.S. naval air station in Key West, Fla., authorities said.

U.S. officials said they think that the man is Brig. Gen. Rafael del Pino Diaz, who would be the highest Cuban military officer publicly identified as defecting from the communist island nation in this decade.

Patrick Korten, a Justice Department spokesman, said last night that "until his departure from Cuba he was identified as the deputy chief of staff of the Cuban Defense ministry and the former chief of the Cuban air force."

"We have no reason to doubt that he is," Korten said.

Details about del Pino and the circumstances of his defection were sketchy yesterday. State Department officials said that for security reasons, they were withholding information. A more detailed account is expected today.

His plane touched down at the Key West Naval Air Station about 2 p.m., shortly after del Pino identified himself to aviation authorities monitoring airspace near the base. Immediately after landing, he and his family were given protection by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Korten said the defector and his family have been paroled into the United States, a status permitting them to remain here indefinitely without passports or visas.

Officials said del Pino was able to take off in the aircraft because of his senior rank and by saying he was taking his family on an aerial jaunt around the island, 90 miles off Florida.

His flight from the government of President Fidel Castro comes as economic pressures have created subdued but intense discontent in Cuba.

"It appears to be a sign of growing disaffection within the Cuban ruling elite as well," said Frank Calzon, director of the Washington-based Cuban-American National Foundation, an anti-Castro group. "This guy was taking his life in his hands," he said. "If this thing had not gone through, he would have been shot."

Calzon said he thinks del Pino served as a pilot in the Cuban forces that routed the 1961 U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion. A 1979 book, "The Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story" by Ron Wyden, identified someone with the same name as serving as a first lieutenant in the Cuban air force at the time, Calzon said. He added that he has been told that del Pino wrote a book about his combat experiences called "Dawn at the Bay of Pigs."

Immigration officials in Miami would not reveal where the officer and his family will stay while he is questioned by U.S. officials. They also declined to say whether del Pino brought documents or possessions with him.

A State Department official said that under an agreement with Cuba, U.S. officials notified Cuban officials of the plane's whereabouts. Officials in Miami identified the plane as a private Cessna 402, but Justice Department officials said it was military trainer.

Del Pino arrived with his wife, their 2-year-old daughter and his two sons, ages 27 and 16, from a previous marriage, the Justice Department said.

According to a Pentagon spokesman, del Pino's plane was picked up on radar at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla., at 1:42 p.m. and two F16 fighter jets were scrambled for an intercept. But before the F16 pilots could see his plane, they were told by ground controllers that it was in radio contact with the Key West base and would be landing there.

The only other reported Cuban military official to have flown to the United States is Eduardo Guerra Jimenez in 1969. Guerra, an air force lieutenant, defected by flying his MiG17 fighter from the island to a base near Miami. Ten years later, Guerra hijacked a Delta Airlines jetliner from New York to Havana.

In December 1981, Jose Luis Llovio Menendez, the chief adviser in Cuba's Finance Ministry, defected in Montreal when a passenger jet en route to Czechoslovakia stopped for refueling. In August 1982, another civilian official, vice minister of industry Luis Negrete, sought asylum in Spain.

Cuban intelligence operations in the United States were disrupted in July 1983 when Jesus Raul Perez Mendez, described as involved in monitoring the activities of Cuban exiles, defected in Miami. His defection reportedly prompted changes in personnel at the Cuban Interests Section here and at Cuba's U.N. mission.

Last year, Spain's relations with Cuba were strained after Madrid expelled the Cuban vice consul and three other embassy staff members accused of trying to kidnap a Cuban defector at gunpoint. Diplomats said the defector, Manuel Antonio Sanchez Perez, had worked for Cuba's G2 secret service. Sanchez applied for asylum in November 1985. Havana called him a thief who had tried to take a $500,000 of government money out of a Madrid bank account.

In January 1985, a Cuban army lieutenant colonel, Joaquin Mourino Perez, defected in Spain, protesting deaths of Cuban soldiers in Africa.

Staff writer John M. Goshko contributed to this report.

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